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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 004200

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SUBJECT: NINEWA: "HEDBA GATHERING" BLOC OFFERS SUNNI ARABS  
AN ALTERNATIVE

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Rob Waller for reasons 1.4 (b)  
) and (d).

11. This is a Ninewa Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT)  
message.

2.. (C/REL AUS, GBR, CAN) Summary: Atheel al Najaifi, a top  
official in the secular nationalist Ninewa political bloc the  
Hedba Gathering, detailed the bloc's strategy and agenda in  
several conversations with PRT. Al  
Najaifi, brother of party leader Osama Al Najaifi, said the  
Hedba bloc stands for secularism, ethnic balance in the  
currently Kurd-dominated provincial government, and economic  
growth. Its core constituency is the Sunni Arab community,  
in particular the thousands of former Iraqi Army officers  
living in Ninewa, but it allied in 2005 with Iyad Allawi's  
Iraqiyya party and includes a Shia and a Yezidi  
representative. While al Najaifi speaks hopefully of  
competing in provincial elections, the bloc's real strength  
in Ninewa is not clear. End Summary.

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Nationalism, Secularism Drive Hedba Gathering  
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12. (C/REL AUS, GBR, CAN) The Hedba Gathering, a Ninewa bloc  
of seven Council of Representatives members named  
after Mosul's landmark leaning minaret, positions itself as a  
secular nationalist political alternative to the Kurdish  
Democratic Party's (KDP) ethnic base and the Iraqi Islamic  
Party's (IIP) Sunni religious base. With connections to  
former Iraqi Army officers and soldiers, the Hedba Gathering  
allied itself with Iyad Allawi's secular Iraqiyya Party in  
the 2005 Council of Representatives elections, taking third  
place behind the KDP and IIP with 11 percent of the  
provincial vote. Never having competed in direct provincial  
elections, the bloc's real local power is unknown.

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Bloc Calls for Ethnic Balance in Provincial Offices  
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13. (C/REL AUS, GBR, CAN) The Hedba Gathering calls for new  
provincial elections to achieve "balance" among the  
Kurdish, Arab and minority parties. The Hedba Gathering sees  
the USG as actively favoring the Kurds under Ninewa's current  
provincial power structure, where the Governor, Deputy  
Governor and 31 of 41 Provincial Council (PC)  
members hail from the Kurdish list that dominated the 2005  
provincial elections that most Sunnis boycotted. Atheel al  
Najaifi said provincial government should ideally look more  
like the internal makeup of the Hedba Gathering. He said the  
bloc itself is more representative of Ninewa's demographics,  
with a Yezidi, a Shia Shabak and five Sunni

Arab representatives from across the province.

¶4. (C/REL AUS, GBR, CAN) Al Nujaifi said the Yezidi and Shia Shabak communities who already participate in the Hedba Gathering, as well as elements of the Kurdish and Turkmen communities, would support the bloc in provincial elections. While he said the bloc communicates with the IIP leadership, he expected that the Hedba Gathering and IIP would compete for the bulk of Sunni Arab votes in new provincial elections.

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Bloc Wants Role for Former Iraqi Army  
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¶5. (C/REL AUS, GBR, CAN) Key to any political settlement in Ninewa are the thousands of former Iraqi Army officers and soldiers living in and around Mosul, al Nujaifi said. He estimates they number 102,000 - a "full army outside the army" - and would support the multi-ethnic provincial government that the Hedba Gathering desires. Al Nujaifi said the Hedba Gathering wants to incorporate these former army officers and soldiers into the Iraqi Security Forces rather than empower tribes through Awakening Councils. Along the same lines, he said the bloc supported the nomination of Sunni Arab General Riyadh to head the newly-formed Ninewa Operations Center.

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Untested Locally, But Current Leaders Wary  
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¶6. (C/REL AUS, GBR, CAN) Comment: The Hedba Gathering has yet to be tested in provincial elections, so it is

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difficult to gauge how much actual support it commands among Sunni Arabs or the minority communities it hopes will respond to its secular nationalist rhetoric. Provincial leaders like Governor Duraid Kashmoula and Shammur Sheikh Abdulla Al Yawr disparage the Hedba Gathering as the al Nujaifi family's attempt to reimpose Ba'athism without popular support. Nonetheless, the al Nujaifis meet with Sheikh Abdulla and consider themselves contenders for the governor's office and PC in future elections.

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Bio Notes: Atheel al Nujaifi  
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¶7. (C/REL AUS, GBR, CAN) Atheel al Nujaifi and his family hail from the village of Nimrud in a Sunni Arab area southeast of Mosul. The family is known for breeding race horses - Al Nujaifi maintained his herd through the war, though some of his horses are now in Damascus. His immediate family lives in Amman, and he maintains business contacts in Jordan, Syria and Iraq. He told the PRT he received a multi-million dollar Overseas Private Investment Corporation investment for a cement plant in southern Iraq. Al Nujaifi helps manage the Hedba Gathering's headquarters in Mosul. He is also the chairman of the board of directors of the Ninewa Business Center, a key local PRT partner for building economic capacity.

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